

Professor Shelley Cobb's *Calling the Shots* project revealed entrenched discrimination and marginalisation of women in the British film industry and resulted in industry bodies taking action to address gender and ethnic balance. But concerns are growing that recent global crises have diverted attention from these issues and halted progress since the project concluded.

ARE MEN STILL CALLING THE SHOTS IN BRITISH CINEMA?

Calling the Shots, which concluded in 2018, coincided with increased global focus on gender equality and diversity which peaked with the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements in the late 2010s. With the film industry under scrutiny, the project set out to investigate what was distinctive about the work of women in British cinema and what obstacles they faced.

Shelley, together with Professor Linda Ruth Williams (now at the University of Exeter), and Dr Natalie Wreyford (now at Kings College London), analysed data from British films from 2003- 2015. They recorded the number of women in six key 'behind the scenes' roles on each film: director, writer, cinematographer, editor, producer and executive producer.

The team also interviewed 59 women filmmakers, including directors Amma Asante (*Belle*), Gurinder Chadha (*Bend It Like Beckham*), and producer Sarah Curtis (*Mrs Brown; Run, Fatboy, Run; The Awakening*).

Structural issues

Their analysis showed that across 3,452 films in production in the UK in that period, only 14 per cent of all directors and seven per cent of all cinematographers were women. Furthermore, just one per cent of all directors and 0.3 per cent of cinematographers were women of colour.

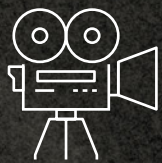
The fact that 50 per cent of filmmaking students in the UK are women makes these findings all the more striking. "Something happens between training and getting into the industry," said Shelley.

Both the data and interviews pointed to structural issues within the film industry which reflect those of wider society. The industry's 'gig economy' is typified by insecurity of income, absence of worker protections, unsociable hours, and lack of childcare provision, all of which make maintaining a family life challenging.

Despite the widespread belief that the industry is a meritocracy, hiring decisions are often buttressed by what Shelley terms 'homophily', or the tendency of people to bond with others who are like them. In a financially risky business, she explained, one of the few ways of reducing risk is to stick with something similar to what has been successful before – whether that is making another costume drama or hiring the same type of director.

In an industry dominated by white men, those white men will tend to hire other white men or, if they are going to hire women, they will hire white women. "There is risk aversion in terms of what you make, and also in who you get to make it," commented Shelley.

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Are men still calling the shots in British cinema?



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Professor Shelley Cobb

“Authority in our culture is very masculinised. We assume men or very masculine people take on roles of authority, and that is particularly true in the way directors are construed. Think of Scorsese, Tarantino, Ken Loach, or Kenneth Branagh – they all fit our idea of what authority looks like.”

“Women, and particularly women of colour, do not fit our image of what counts as authority.”

Despite previous efforts to address the problem, such as training or shadowing schemes, the data showed there was no long-term improvement in gender equality in British cinema. The problem, said Shelley, is that “you’re trying to fix the people who are constantly being told to fix themselves. What you are not doing is intervening with the people who make the decisions or with the structures of decision-making.”

Influencing the industry

The team spoke about their findings at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, the British Film Institute (BFI), on BBC Radio 4 Woman’s Hour and at various UK universities. In May 2018 they presented at the 71st Cannes Film Festival as well as hosting the Women’s Film and Television History Network fourth biennial conference. Their data has been

quoted frequently in media coverage of inequality in the film industry. The research is publicly available on the Calling the Shots website.

Calling the Shots gave the BFI (a cultural charity, a National Lottery distributor, and the UK’s lead organisation for film and the moving image) the evidence it needed to take action. The organisation decided to adopt new gender and diversity targets for directors, writers and producers of films supported by their Film Fund.

These targets included:

- a 50-50 gender balance in supported filmmakers
- 20% target for minority ethnic filmmakers
- 9% target for LGBTQ-identifying filmmakers
- 7% target for filmmakers with a disability.

The BFI has since extended their targets to include class and caregivers.

What has changed?

Reflecting on the Calling the Shots research today, Shelley said, “The BFI is meeting and sometimes exceeding its targets, and it continues to set an example.” Before adopting these targets, the BFI had already instituted diversity standards for projects in receipt of BFI Funding, which were taken up by BAFTA and the American Academy.

However, unlike Calling the Shots, which analysed both gender and ethnicity across multiple roles, the BFI’s diversity standards and the targets policy fail to take account of intersectionality. This could result in an incomplete picture of how individuals may be doubly marginalised on the basis of gender and ethnicity, although the BFI is working to improve this.

Without commissioning films and overseeing productions from beginning to end, and with no leverage with the UK independent sector, international co-productions, or American films that use British industry facilities, there are limits to what the BFI can achieve.

Change across the wider British film industry remains incremental at best. The BFI’s annual yearbook, which includes statistics for all British films, shows that women still only make up around 30% of people in director and writer roles.

“I am concerned that we are in a moment where the attention has come off gender equality and diversity,” said Shelley. “For structural, long-lasting change we need action on multiple fronts.”

Addressing sexual, racial, and disability-related harassment and the issues around the industry’s gig economy are likely to require change at societal and government level. But the film industry can and should do more to change its culture, which assumes that filmmaking requires “late nights and early mornings, where you never get a break until the film is over.”

Shelley is determined to use the Calling the Shots findings to shift the dial. The project continues to promote discussions and further research, including outside the UK. She plans to use the data and the interviews to support filmmaking teachers in encouraging students to “pay attention to these things from the beginning.”

In influencing industry training Shelley hopes that Calling the Shots can have a lasting impact on the film industry, helping to alter the attitudes of the people who will be commissioning films and choosing directors and producers in the future.

For more information about Calling the Shots visit the project website:

www.callingtheshots138740090.wordpress.com

The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and assisted by project partners the BFI, Broadcasting Entertainment Communications and Theatre Union (BECTU), Women in Film & TV (UK), Harbour Lights Cinema and the Shetland Film Festival.

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